NEW
NICK CARTER WEEKLY

Issued Weekly. By Subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at New York Post Office by STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y.

No. 376. Price, Five Cents.

THE CROSS OF DAGGERS

OR THE LAST OF THE DEVIL WORSHIPERS

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"

Between the table and the platform where Nick stood, there seemed to flow one unending stream of fire, where the light from the lamp glistened upon the knives, as they flew across the intervening space.

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No. 376. NEW YORK, March 12, 1904. Price Five Cents.

THE CROSS OF DAGGERS;

OR,

In the Lair of the Devil Worshipers.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE PRISONER IN THE BACK.

It was ten o'clock in the evening, Friday night.

Nick Carter, disguised as a middle-aged gentleman of well-to-do position in the world, was standing idly near the corner of First Avenue and Twentieth Street, evidently awaiting the arrival of another person. Near him, in fact, not twenty feet away, a closed carriage had drawn up at the curb and the driver seemed to be dozing on the box, as if he, too, were awaiting the coming of an expected fare, but there was no apparent coincidence between the presence of the man standing on the sidewalk and the waiting hack.

Presently, through Twentieth Street, from the direction of Second Avenue, a man approached them. His head was bent forward, and he seemed to have centered his whole attention upon the pavement in front of him as he walked, and so absorbed was he in his occupation that he did not perceive that he was followed.

It is doubtful, indeed, if he would have devoted a second glance upon the individual who was tracking him, had he noticed him at all, for that individual appeared to be nothing more than a Chinese laundryman with a bundle of his wares beneath his arm, bent upon delivering them to their owner in the neighborhood.

Nevertheless, when the detective discovered the approach of the two, he kept his eyes upon the Chinaman rather than upon the gentleman, and when the former dropped the bundle he was carrying, Nick took several steps nearer to the hack and said something in a low voice to the driver, who instantly leaped to the ground and opened the door of his vehicle.

As if the plans of Nick Carter were assisted even by that uncertain quantity called chance, there was not at that moment another human being in sight along the street, save those already mentioned, and so Nick drew even nearer to the open door of the conveyance.

Presently the man who was approaching with his head bent forward, came so near to Nick that he might have touched him, and then, with a quick motion the detective placed himself directly in front of the stranger.

"Pardon me, sir," he said, "but have you lost something?"

"Nothing more than I shall be able to discover again without your assistance," replied the stranger, haughtily.

"But I have just found something," continued Nick, unruffled.

"Then keep it," said the man. "I have lost nothing."

"No? And yet if you will take the trouble to look inside this hack you will——"

"Confound your hack! Let me pass."

"Really, sir——"

"Let me pass, I say!"

He started forward impetuously, as if it were his intention to brush the detective aside, willy nilly, which was precisely what Nick desired him to do.

In an instant the stranger found himself seized in a grip of steel; a hand was placed over his mouth to prevent him from crying out, his arms were drawn behind him and shackled by the driver, who had stood ready to render assistance at the right moment, other shackles were snapped upon his ankles and he was bundled unceremoniously into the carriage.

"Now, sir," said Nick, sternly, "you are in no danger, and you will suffer no personal injury. After a few hours you shall have your liberty again and you will have lost nothing more than a little time. Now, will you promise to keep silent—to utter no sound save in a natural tone of voice, or shall I put a gag in your mouth?"

"You needn't gag me. I'll keep still," growled the man.

"All right," said Nick. "But bear in mind that at the first attempt to call out or to attract attention, you will probably get hurt, and the gag will be put into your mouth besides."

"Will you tell me what this outrage means?" asked the man, who seemed to be perfectly cool.

"I will, presently. Just now there isn't time. When we arrive at the house where I am conducting you, you will find out all that is puzzling you now."

"Who the devil are you, anyhow?"

"Just a person who desires to make your better acquaintance," said Nick, laughing.

"Humph! You take a mighty queer way to do it."

"Possibly. However, as long as it is effective, what difference does that make?"

"None to you, I suppose, but considerable to me. You are keeping me from an important engagement."

"I am quite well aware of that, sir. In fact, that is why I stopped you—because I did not wish you to keep that engagement."

"The devil you didn't!"

"Exactly. In fact, I wished to keep it for you."

"You're a cool proposition," said the stranger.

"Comfortably so, thank you," replied Nick.

"Confound your impudence! You must be as strong as an ox, my friend."

"I am certainly not a weakling."

"That you are not. It takes more than an ordinary man to handle me."

"So I have been told."

"Eh? You know me, then?"

"Certainly. Why not?"

The man was silent for a moment, and then, in a perfectly commonplace tone he inquired:

"I wonder if by chance you could be that detective fellow whom they call Nick Carter?"

"It is more than likely," said Nick.

"Are you Nick Carter, sure enough?"

"You have said it, Mr. Chelsea."

"Good. I'm rather glad to meet you, even under these unpleasant circumstances."

"That is kind of you," said Nick.

"Don't mention it. But, I say, now that you have got me, what are you going to do with me? I am not a crook."

"I am quite well aware of that, sir.'

"What are you going to do with me?"

"I have already told you. I want to keep your engagement in your place."

The stranger laughed aloud.

"That's a good one," he said. "I heard you when you said it, but I didn't believe you—any more than I do now."

"Why not?"

"Because you can't."

"Again, why not?"

"Well, there are several reasons, the chief one being that nobody could keep it but me, and if anybody should try it, he would be a dead Indian before he was halfway through with the game."

"Are you sure of that?"

"I'd bet a cold thousand on it."

"Done. I'll take your bet, Mr. Chelsea; all the more readily because I know that you can well afford to pay it, and because, by winning that thousand I will save you your entire fortune and probably your life."

"All right, Carter. The bet is on. As for the rest of what you have said, that's all balderdash, you know."

"Why?"

"Oh, I'm no chicken. I'm not giving up my dough to the first man that asks me, and I'm much too used to danger to let my life slip out of my hands without—well, without showing a few others how to lead the way into the next world. I could point out several quiet spots in the world where the grass is growing over those who have tried to speed my way into a better and brighter life. I don't suppose you believe that you can force me to give up any particulars about that engagement, do you?"

"I hadn't such an idea."

"I'm glad you had not, because I wouldn't."

"You don't have to, Mr. Chelsea, because, as a matter of fact, I know more about the secrets of your new friends than you do yourself."

"Bluff, Carter, bluff!"

"Nary a bluff, Mr. Chelsea."

"Well, I'll see you and raise you. Where was I going?"

"I will reply to that question, but not exactly in the way you expect. You were going, my friend, to a place where you would be compelled to place your fortune and your life in the hands and under the absolute control of the most unscrupulous devil that ever lived."

"Then I suppose I ought to thank you for having kept me out of bad company?" said the man, with a perceptible sneer.

"You will thank me before I am through with you, but I don't expect you to do so to-night, because I have wounded you on your most vulnerable point."

"Have you, indeed? What is that?"

"Your vanity."

"I say, Carter, I like your cheek. If I was free I'd take a fall out of you for saying that,"

"I will say it to you some time when you are free."

"Good! Is that a bargain?"

"Sure. Now, here we are at my house. Will you promise to walk in quietly if I take the shackles off your feet? Thank you. You will find this a much more comfortable place in which to spend the night

than in the meeting place of your friends, the Devil Worshipers."

"So you are on to that, too, eh? All right, Carter. You've got the drop on me just now, but my turn will come—later."

CHAPTER II.

STEALING AN IDENTITY.

The detective conducted his involuntary guest straight to his own private room, and pointing to a chair of inviting appearance, asked him to occupy it.

"Take a seat," said the detective, "and I will remove the shackles from your wrists."

"Better not," replied Chelsea, "for I won't promise not to try to keep that engagement, after all."

"Oh, you won't keep that," smiled Nick; "and you will find the chair so comfortable that you'll be glad to remain there. Ah! thank you."

The man dropped into the chair indicated, and instantly Nick pressed a spring at the back of it, and two heavy oak arms swung around in front of the occupant and locked themselves together, so that he was effectually a prisoner, and he could not have arisen had he possessed thrice the strength of Nick Carter himself.

"I hope you find yourself quite comfortable," said the detective, with a smile; and the man in the chair grinned back at him.

"Carter, you're a wonder," he said, composedly. "I fully intended to have it out with you the moment you freed my hands, and now, behold! I couldn't get upon my feet if I tried my—er—best, could I? The chair is quite comfortable, too, as long as one is satisfied to sit still. It must weigh about a ton, doesn't it?"

"Not quite; only I wouldn't advise you to try to carry it away. It is loaded with more things than weight."

"Would you mind telling me what you are going to do with me now?"

"I'm going to borrow you."

'Borrow me! It strikes me that you have come pretty near to doing that very thing already."

"Oh, no," said Nick. "I have taken you by force; but you will observe that I have only taken your body—that is, your liberty. Now I propose to borrow your identity."

"I'm afraid you'll have to explain that ante, partner; it's rather over my limit."

"That's easy. I'm going to become Mr. Thomas Chelsea for a few hours. Do you understand now?"

"Not quite. You are a little too much for me yet."

"Well, watch me and you will catch on presently. If you will be patient I'll show you a kind of art that you have never imagined. In other words, in about fifteen or twenty minutes I'll show you your own double standing before you, and it will be so perfect that your own mother wouldn't know the difference. She would't know which is Tom Chelsea and which is not."

"Bully! I'd like to see that done, inasmuch as I can't help it. Fire away. You are the actor and I am the audience; is that it?"

"Yes, that's it."

The detective secured a mirror from one corner of the room and stood it beside his guest. It rested upon a pedestal not unlike a chiffonier, save that it was much lighter in weight and the drawers were shallow. Then, opening the latter, he took therefrom the tools with which he intended to work, consisting of paints and pigments, brushes and pencils, and, in short, a complete array of material for the most complex make-up.

"Now, Mr. Chalsea," he said, "I believe we are ready."

"Good. Let here go," replied Chelsea. "This looks like a one, two, three shot in your favor."

"It is," said Nick. "Watch me."

He stripped off his coat and vest, collar and tie, and began.

Thomas Chelsea was not much past thirty years of age and was approximately of the same height and build as the detective, but his hair was sandy in hue, and he wore a mustache and a tuft of hair upon his nether lip. Also there was a scar of considerable proportions over his right temple which began among the hairs on his head and led downward to the lobe of his ear. His complexion was rather florid, and his cheeks were somewhat more full than the detective's, while his chin was not so prominent and his nose was of decidedly different shape, as were also his ears.

But these differences were mere details to the art of the detective, who enjoyed nothing that was connected with his profession better than to impersonate another; and the more difficult the impersonation, the better he liked it.

For the benefit of the few of our readers who are not familiar with the beginning of Nick Carter's career, it is well to mention at this point that the detective was trained almost from the cradle for the profession he was to follow, and that the sudden and violent death of his father placed in an instant the entire responsibility of many great and perplexing cases in his hands while he was still a youth.

But he was equal to them all.

In nothing that could pertain to the uses of his career had his education been neglected. He was proficient in almost every spoken language of the globe; his muscles were like steel and he possessed sufficient strength to put Sandow on his back; he had studied vocalization until he could pitch his voice in any key he chose and disguise it, or imitate the voice of another, be it man or woman, with the ease of an accomplished ventriloquist; when he was sixteen years old, he could stand behind a high-backed chair in one corner of a room, and without leaving that spot or using other accessories than those he could carry in ordinary pockets, he could personate thirteen different characters in as many minutes, and do them all so perfectly that not one of them would be thought to resemble another, and for each one he had a different voice.

On one occasion, while his father was still alive, and while Nick was yet a mere lad, he made himself up as a representation of his father, and copied him so perfectly in feature, voice and figure that his own mother was deceived until the young joker could hold in no longer and betrayed himself by laughing.

Thus had his education, watched over by his father from the child's infancy, developed every possibility within him to the point of perfection, and so there was nothing which comes within the range of human attainment to which he had given his attention, in which he did not excel.

And so, as will be perceived, the mere copying of Thomas Chelsea's appearance and voice and the perfect impersonation of his character, became, to express it in commonplace but emphatic words, "dead easy."

While he worked now, in front of the mirror with the eyes of his model fixed upon him, it would have been an amusing entertainment to have watched the face of Thomas Chelsea.

When the detective began his process of copying, the expression upon the face of his guest suggested amused indifference and supercilious unbelief that it could be done.

As he proceeded that expression began to change, and presently to develop into one of undisguised wonder, and at last he became so absorbed in the contemplation of what was taking place before him that he forgot the circumstances under which he was permitted to view the work of the great expert and remembered only the rapid evolutions of the brushes and pencils, the change in contour and shape of the face before him, and the wonderful transformation that was taking place before his eyes.

Never would he have believed such a performance

passible had he not been permitted to see it for himslf, and at last, when it was completed and the detective threw down his tools, Chelsea leaned back in his chair, drew a long breath, and with an expression of dismay upon his face which even the detective would have found it difficult to imitate, he ejaculated:

"Well, what do you think of that!"

"Precisely," said Nick, laughing, and imitating perfectly the voice and drawl of his companion. "What do you think of it?"

"It is perfect. I'm blowed if you don't look more like Tom Chelsea than I do myself."

"Thank you. That is something of a compliment."

"More than you think, perhaps. I say, Carter?"

"Well?"

"It begins to look as if I were going to keep that engagement after all."

"So you are."

"And play the traitor, eh? Betray the whole outfit?"

"If necessary; yes."

"That is rather rotten treatment, isn't it?"

"Perhaps; but it depends upon how one looks at it."

"You look like a pretty square sort of chap, Carter."

"Do you mean now? Since I have changed my appearance?"

"No, confound it! I mean before you changed; while you were yourself."

"Then I'll have to thank you."

"Blow that! That isn't what I am getting at."

"Well, what are you getting at?"

"This: I don't like to let you take my identity away with you and use it to betray an outfit that I've sworn not to betray. I never went back on anybody in my life, and I don't relish the thought of having it done in my name."

"Very well. Let me return the compliment you paid me just now. You look like a pretty square sort of chap yourself."

"I am, too, by thunder! As square as they make 'em. Anybody who knows Tom Chelsea will tell you that."

"I don't need to be told. I believe it."

"Well, then, why the dev——"

"Look here, Chelsea, would you stand by with your hands in your pockets and see a child tortured without trying to prevent it?"

"I reckon not, Mr. Carter," replied Chelsea, calmly, but his eyes blazed and his voice was a full tone deeper than before. "Even this infernal chair couldn't hold me in a case of that sort."

"I believe you. If a woman called out to you for assistance, would the oath you have taken to the people you were going to meet to-night, keep you from going to her assistance?"

"Not by several damsites."

"Would you consent to sit idly near a spot where an unoffending person was made to undergo excrutiating torture, and not lift your arm or your voice to stop it?"

"Of course I would not. But I don't see——"

"If you had gone where you intended to go to-night, you would have been forced to do all that I have described, and there would have been no way for you to prevent it. You would have been as helpless as you are now. I am doing you the greatest favor of your life in bringing you here, compelling you by force to stay here, and by going to keep that engagement in your place."

"Maybe that's true and again maybe it isn't. Suppose I don't believe you?"

"You can believe what you please. I know, and that is sufficient for me."

"Gee whiz, Carter, but I reckon you're the right sort after all."

"You'll know, after a while."

"What are you going to do with me while you are away?"

"Leave you where you are. There are books and magazines within your reach. There are refreshments and cigars to your hand, and if you want anything that you cannot reach, touch that bell on the table beside you."

"But suppose that outfit should do you, and you shouldn't come back at all?"

"I always come back."

"I reckon that's so. Say, how in blazes did you get onto this Devil Worshiping business?"

"That is too long a story to tell now."

"Well, then, how did you connect me with it, and how did you happen to pick me out for your pipe dream to-night?"

"I don't mind telling you. It was purely an accident as far as you are concerned. I, and my assistants have been keeping an eye on the Devil Worshipers for some time. I had made up my mind to attend their meeting and I wanted somebody to copy so that I would be admitted. We spotted you while you were following up the chalk marks on the pavement that told you where the meeting was to be held, and I heard you say that you were going to meet one of the members near the place at ten o'clock. I laid for you, and you know the rest. Ten o'clock gave me plenty of time, as the meeting doesn't take place till two in the morning. When it does take place I'll be there, and when I see you again you'll thank me for keeping you away."

"Maybe I will—if you do come back; but I'll tell you right now, Carter, that outfit is not an easy one to fool."

CHAPTER III.

NICK CARTER GIVES HIS ORDERS.

When the detective turned to leave the room Chelsea called him back and there was a humorous twinkle in his eyes, as he said:

"Look here, Mr. Carter, there is one thing connected with this expedition of yours that I have a right to insist upon."

"What may that be?" asked Nick.

"Are you aware of the fact that you are responsible for the conduct of Thomas Chelsea while you are out in that rig?"

"Perfectly."

"Well, I want you to keep him in good company."

"Saving the presence of the Devil Worshipers, I think I may promise you that."

"And keep him sober, too."

"That might depend on how much he can stand."

"Ha! That is just the point; exactly the point. He can't stand a drop."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, you see, I've sworn off, and you see if you should happen to take a nip or two while you're circulating around in that rig, it might get into my blood again. There; so long. I won't keep you any longer. You may think that I take this situation with a good deal of complacency, but the fact is I learned long ago not to strive against the impossible, and just now it is utterly impossible for me to prevent you from playing out your little game to the end. I don't mind telling you, however, that if you will let me up for half a minute——"

"Good-night," said Nick, laughing, and turning toward the door. "Keep up your spirits, and don't get lonely."

"Narry a lonely; and don't you forget that Tommy Chelsea'll see the day he'll get even. That isn't a threat, Nick Carter; it's just a statement."

In the library Nick found Ten-Ichi and Patsy awaiting him.

Patsy, as the reader no doubt suspects, was the driver of the hack which brought the detective and his unwilling companion to the house, while Ten-Ichi had

played the part of the Chinaman in order to assure Nick by the dropping of his bundle that the man he was following was the one who was wanted.

"Now, youngsters," said Nick, "I want you to pay attention to what I am about to say. Ten-Ichi, you have been initiated among the Devil Worshipers in your own country. You will, therefore, experience no difficulty in obtaining admittance to the meeting of their clique to-night."

"None at all, sir."

"I want you to go there and to work on your own plans, independently of me, for, as you see by this disguise, and as you know by what I have already told you before we captured Chelsea, I'm going to be present at that meeting."

"You will have to take the initiation, and it won't be pleasant," said Ten-Ichi.

"Never mind that. With the schooling you have given me about their passwords and signs, I think I will have no difficulty. What I want you to understand is this: That, no matter what happens, or what takes place, even if you believe me to be in imminent danger, I don't want you to raise a hand or to do a thing to assist me unless I give you the signal that I want you to do so. Will you obey me?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Remember, I expect implicit obedience on this point. Even if they discover that I am an impostor and things come to a free fight, to the point where you think you must take a hand in the matter, you are to do nothing unless I give you the signal."

"All right. I understand."

"This is the point, my lad. Nobody but myself can understand what my plans may be, and if you should act too soon, or without my desiring it, you might spoil everything. So the thing for you to do is to forget that I am Nick Carter. Forget that I am there at all. Make yourself believe that I am really Thomas Chelsea."

"I will do all that, sir."

"You are not to remember that I am in existence unless I give you the signal. In that case, you will know how to act. The whole point of what I wish to accomplish to-night, exists in the fact that we will both be there, and that we will be utterly independent of each other."

"Yes, sir."

"I want you, also, if you can, to forget that you are a detective. I want you to play your part well enough to make yourself believe that you are actually one of and with those devils, to enter into all their schemes and plans, and to become, for the time being, a veritable devil yourself."

"Yes, sir."

"And if for any reason I find that I want you to take the track of Dazaar, if Dazaar is there, as I feel he will be, I will sneeze five times in quick succession. Do you comprehend?"

"Perfectly."

"Five times so that there can be no mistake. Anybody might sneeze three times, but few would go five. Now that ends your instructions. Go to your room and get ready. Disguise yourself so that I won't know you myself, if you can."

"No hope of that, sir."

"Well, try it anyhow. Go your own way. Work by yourself. Skip now, for I want to talk with Patsy."

Ten-Ichi left the room and the detective turned to the young Irishman.

"You know the house, lad?" he asked.

"That I do, sir."

"There is a little shoe repair shop in the basement next door. Have you noticed it?"

"Sure. But I think it has changed hands two days

ago, because the fellow who was working there yesterday was not the same one——"

"Good, Patsy. You're all right. It has changed hands. I bought it out, rented the Italian who owned it another shop and for two days I have been mending shoes myself."

"Then, by the powers!" exclaimed Patsy, slapping his knee in delight, "you have a pair of my own brogans mending them now, and I think I swore at you for not having them done."

"Correct, Patsy."

"And even I never suspected you!"

"How should you? But I have been doing something else than mending shoes. I have cut a very comfortable passageway between the cellar of that house and the next one."

"That's fine," said Patsy.

"Now, my lad, your play to-night is to fix yourself up as a young Italian, go to that shop, light your lamp —one will do—and heap all the shoes you can find around your bench, then put on your apron and go to work. It is rather late to open up shop, but it is early enough for our purposes, for not one of this gang will show up before half-past one, and other people can think what they please."

"I'm on, sir."

"While you are at work several customers will call. Each one will bring shoes for you to mend. If, while you are looking at them to see what repairing is necessary, your customer should disappear through the back part of your shop, don't worry about him. He will have business somewhere near that hole in the wall."

"Correct, sir."

"There should be five of them, and you will know them all by means of a chalk mark in the form of an X on the sole of one of the shoes that each one brings to you."

"And if one should show up without that letter X?"

"Don't let him get past you, that's all."

"And then, sir?"

"You are to close up shop at a quarter past two and go into the back part of the shop, where the men will be waiting for you. Take them to the cellar. I have provided each one with a light, and you had better take your own along with you."

"Is that all?"

"Not quite. I have examined the next house thoroughly, and I have discovered that the place selected for this meeting is in the back part of the cellar, which they have fitted up for the purpose. That back cellar is divided from the front portion by a heavy partition which is really a part of the foundation put there to strengthen the building which was intended for a factory."

"I understand, sir."

"The hole that I have cut through the wall communicates with the front cellar, and the means of communication between the front and back cellar is through a doorway which is closed by dropping an iron shutter."

"That is not an easy thing to open, is it?"

"It was not, until I fixed it. It was so arranged that it was impossible to open it from the outside after it had been closed from the inside, but I have changed all that. You will find an iron bar in the cellar of the house where your shop is situated; take that with you, and if you hear me call, 'Now Patsy, now!' jam your bar behind the casing on the right side of the shutter and the whole thing will fall at your feet. Do you understand?"

"You bet your life I do!"

"The five men you will have with you are from the central office, they will be in plain clothes, and they have been instructed to take their orders from you; and now, my lad, here is the important thing about your duties: There are old barrels and boxes in the front cellar behind which you and your men can hide. You

are to hide behind them as quickly as you can after you enter the cellar. You are to stay hidden until you hear my signal, and if you do not hear it, you are to remain hidden until you see me leave the cellar. You and the men are to maintain absolute silence, and if you stay there till doomsday, you are not to make a move unless I call—not even if you hear a row in progress."

"All right, sir."

"Now you skip, too. Open up your shop as soon as you can, for the men will begin to appear at one o'clock. Do you understand your duties thoroughly?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Good. Mind that you live up to them."

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE LAIR OF THE DEVIL WORSHIPERS.

When Nick Carter arrived in front of the house where the meeting of the Clique of the Devil Worshipers was to take place the street and the entire neighborhood seemed deserted.

Nor did the appearance of the house itself indicate that company was expected.

In fact, the only evidence of life to be seen in the neighborhood was in the shoe shop of the Italian, from the light of a solitary oil lamp beaming forth into the darkness, and showed that the patient toiler was still at work, driving pegs into much worn footgear.

The detective glanced approvingly in upon that scene for a moment, and confessed to himself that Patsy's disguise was as perfect as it could be, and not once did the young man raise his eyes from the work upon which he was engaged.

"It takes a pretty cool youngster to sit there and peg away at shoes and not once to attempt to gratfy his curiosity by looking up to see who passes when he expects so many to pass," mused Nick. "No man could be blessed with better assistants than I have got, and I have never found one of them wanting yet."

Then he ascended the steps, turned the doorknob and entered the hall, for there were no fastenings to bar his progress.

All was silnce and darkness in front of him, but he stepped inside and closed the door behind him as he had been directed to do. Then, with his back against the door, he waited.

Not a sound greeted his ears as minute after minute passed in absolute darkness and utter stillness, but the detective knew that he was not to move nor speak until he was addressed, and so he waited. To break the first rule that had been imposed upon him would have been fatal to his further progress, and Nick Carter knew how to wait better than most men.

At last, after a silence that must have endured fully ten minutes, and which seemed like an hour to the waiting man, a voice spoke to him out of the impenetrable darkness.

"Who are you, and what do you want here?" it demanded; and Nick, following out the instructions he had learned from Ten-Ichi, answered not a word.

"Who are you, I say?" the voice demanded again, and still Nick did not reply.

"Where did you come from?" was the next question.

No reply.

"What is your name?"

Silence was the only answer to that question.

"Have you business here?"

Still Nick was silent.

"In the devil's name have you lost your tongue?" demanded the voice.

"No," replied Nick. "I have it with me."

"Well, what do you want?"

No answer.

"Can't you speak?"

No answer.

"I see that you are all right. Follow us."

Steps sounded as the owner of the voice passed

through the hall, but Nick did not move out of his tracks, and at the end of the hall, the owner of the voice paused and called back to him:

"Are you coming?"

Nick neither moved nor spoke.

"For goodness' sake come along," was the next command.

Nick stayed where he was.

"The devil take your reluctance and all your answers, too," muttered the voice in the darkness. "Are you coming?"

"Yes, I am coming now," said Nick. "When you speak as one who knows, I will follow you."

"Who do you wish to see?"

"The ruler of Hades."

"He is not here."

"But I am."

"Who, then, are you?"

"He whom I seek."

"Then, if you are he whom you seek, why come here in search of him?"

"I have business with him."

"Of what nature?"

Nick did not reply.

"Why, in satan's name, don't you answer?"

"Because I have spoken five times since you uttered his name, and I will now speak only five times until you utter it again."

"Well, come with me."

A little point of light such as might be made by an electric scarfpin showed at the end of the hall, and Nick advanced toward it, and in a moment more was following his guide down the stairs to the basement of the house.

There, they presently emerged into a back room where there was no furniture save a square table in the center of the room, and upon that a lamp was burning.

Nick's conductor advanced to the opposite wall of the table and turned. Then he raised the lamp over his head so that the light fell full upon the detective's features, or rather upon the features he had borrowed for the occasion, with the help of his art, and Nick, by the light thus afforded, had an opportunity to discover something of the appearance of his guide.

He could see but little, however, for the man was enveloped in a domino-like coak of bright scarlet, while over his head was drawn a pointed hood of the same hue. This latter entirely concealed his features, for, with the exception of two round holes through which his gleaming eyes could be seen, it completely covered his face.

"Write," he said to Nick, pushing a pad of paper and a pencil toward him.

"The wary never commit themselves to writing," replied Nick, without moving.

The conductor put the lamp upon the table, and, drawing back a little, said:

"Had you a name to give to me?"

"The devil's."

"None other?"

"My own name among men."

"What is that?"

"Thomas."

"And the remaining half of it?"

"Chelsea."

"It is well. Bare your left arm."

Nick stripped off his coat and cuffs, and then drew back his sleeve. Then his conductor stepped forward and gave him a quill pen.

"Write," he commanded, at the same time drawing a scroll from among his draperies and spreading it open upon the table.

Without an instant's hesitation, the detective drew his jackknife from his pocket and with it cut a quick but small gash in his arm, just sufficiently large to draw a little blood. Then, taking the quill in his left hand, he

smeared it in the blood, changed it back again to his right hand, and with it wrote upon the scroll the name of Thomas Chelsea.

Then, calmly, and with deliberation, he crushed the pen into a mass of pieces, threw it on the floor and ground it under his foot until it had lost all semblance of a pen.

"Well done," said the conductor. "Now come with me."

He led the way out of the room by another door than the one through which they had entered it, and presently opening another, descended a flight of stairs which the detective knew must eventually lead them to the back cellar, in which he felt assured the meeting was to be held.

Nor was he mistaken, for soon they crossed the front part of the cellar past the old barrels and boxes to which he had referred in his conversation with Patsy, and halted before the iron screen.

Against that the conductor struck one quick, sharp blow, whereupon another like blow was struck on the opposite side.

After that there was a wait of a minute, and then a second blow was struck, which was answered like the first, and this was continued until five blows had been given and returned, whereupon the screen was raised and they passed through.

When the iron screen dropped into place behind him, Nick realized that he was at last in the very lair of the Devil Worshipers, and indeed the spectacle that greeted his eyes might well have convinced him of the fact had nothing else occurred to demonstrate it.

There were exactly thirteen persons present, for Nick counted them quickly, wondering, when he had made out the number, if they were not the famous thirteen followers of Dazaar, and if he was to be the only novitiate present on that occasion. But then he remembered that he had appeared promptly at two o'clock, the hour appointed for the meeting, and that Ten-Ichi had told him that while it was forgiven to be somewhat late at a meeting, it was a deep offense to be ahead of time, and he had gleaned that much from Chelsea, that he was expected at two. If there were others, they were doubtless expected to arrive later.

In that surmise he was correct, as events demonstrated.

The thirteen who were present were arranged in a semicircle around a platform—that is, eleven of them were, for one stood beside the detective, and another occupied the platform, and toward this last individual Nick immediately turned his attention..

All the others were arrayed in the same domino-like robes and hoods of scarlet as his conductor, but the individual who had been seated upon the throne-like chair on the platform and who rose when he entered, wore a costume that would have done credit to a genuine Mephistopheles, even to the tight-fitting garments, the long, pointed shoes and the pronged horns upon his head.

Everything about his dress was a brilliant red, and even his face—for he wore no mask of any description—and hands were stained to the same color.

Altogether, he was an imposing and rather a terrible figure, and Nick, gazing upon him with all the concentrated powers of his penetration in play, thought to himself:

"I wonder if, at last, I am in the presence of the real Dazaar."

CHAPTER V.

THE DEVIL'S UNEXPECTED GUEST.

With the exception of the fact that the head devil of the lot got upon his feet when Nick was ushered into the room, not another one there moved nor turned his head. The detective glanced sharply at them in the

effort to determine if they were men or women, or a mixture of both, but he could not decide.

Neither had he any means of knowing if Ten-Ichi were among them yet, for the reason that the costumes were all so precisely similar that one looked exactly like the other.

But he was only given a moment in which to think, for the man on the dais addressed him.

"Compatriot," he said, and Nick thought there was a cadence in the voice which was strangely familiar to his ears, although he could not determine where he had heard it before; he was only certain that it was disguised, and so perfectly that it defied discovery, if indeed he had ever heard it at all, "you have successfully passed through every preliminary step that is necessary to bring you here among us. Are you aware what penalty is demanded for coming here at all?"

"I know nothing till you tell me," replied Nick, for he knew that he was now expected to reply to every question addressed to him, and to select his own words for his answers.

"Death," was the solemn utterance of the person on the throne. "I do not mean by that that we will inflict that calamity upon you, but that death is the penalty which must eventually and of necessity come to us all. But also, my remark has another, and a more timely meaning, for it means that, having come this far into the secrets of our order, you cannot turn back, and that if you are found to be inimical to us in any way, your life will pay the forfeit. Have you any virtues of which you did not rid yourself before coming here?"

"I do not recall any at the present moment."

"Have you any regrets for coming here?"

"No. I think I can honestly assure you that I am mighty glad I came."

"Good. That is well answered. What was your own secret purpose in joining us?"

"Pure deviltry, I think."

"That is also well answered, although the expression may have two meanings; one of levity and one of sincerity."

"I can assure you that I spoke in all sincerity."

"We will so accept the statement. Through whose influence were you induced to come here at all?"

"I was cautioned not to reply to that question."

"But you must reply to it?"

"Call it the devil's, then. That is the only answer you will get."

"Well said. Are you fully prepared to undergo the initiation and in so doing to forswear every thought which hitherto you have held to be more or less sacred?"

"I am."

At that moment there was a summons upon the iron screen exactly like the one that Nick's guide had given, and the man on the dais said:

"There is another candidate—a woman. She is now waiting ouside to be admitted, but before she comes among us, and while the signals are being exchanged, I have a warning to give you. All ideas of chivalry are left outside this order. She will suffer her initiation before you suffer yours, and I use the word suffer advisedly. You will now be enveloped in a robe like those which cover our companions. From this moment until I, myself, ask you to speak, you will not utter a sound or move from the chair which will be given you, you are to look upon it calmly and unflinchingly; and she will have much to endure."

Nick laughed outright, putting as much cruelty and recklessness into the tone of his voice as was possible, and, with a sneer, he said:

"I reckon, Mr. Devil, that I can stand as much as anybody here."

"Do you think so? We will try you; but it is best not to be boastful."

Nick shrugged his shoulders, and at this instant a robe and hood were thrown over his head.

Then, just as he was drawn backward into a chair between two of the hooded figures, the iron screen was raised and to the self-confessed surprise of the detective, the Countess of Croydon, a woman whom Nick had suspected of being a Devil Worshiper, was ushered into the room in much the same manner as he had been led to the place himself.

Nick noticed that she was frightfully pale and visibly nervous; but nevertheless she walked to the position where he had stood a moment before and replied to the questions that had been asked him in much the same manner that he had done; but he could not refrain from wondering how she had passed the ordeal in the darkness outside.

To the question which asked if she were prepared to undergo the initiation of the Devil Worshipers she replied without hesitation, and two of the hooded members had stepped to her side with the evident intention of proceeding with the preliminaries of the ceremony, when, to the plainly evident surprise of all who were gathered there, another alarm was sounded against the iron screen which barred the entrance to the place.

Plainly this summons had neither been expected nor anticipated, for several of the hooded fraternity leaped to their feet, and even the head devil who sat upon the dais threw a glance rapidly around the room as if he were engaged in making a hasty count of those who were present.

A long time was allowed to elapse before any notice was taken of the summons—so long, indeed, that any person other than one who understood the significance of waiting must have lost patience and sounded a second alarm.

But whoever it was outside the door, he made no sound whatever, while all within the room maintained perfect silence while the minutes ticked themselves away until fully a quarter of an hour had elapsed since the alarm.

Then it was the horned devil on the dais stepped down and advanced toward the iron screen; and upon reaching it, instead of rapping loudly as had been done in the cases of the entrance of Nick, and of the Countess of Croydon, he hit upon it, one light tap with the tips of his fingers, making a sound so faint that the detective wondered if it could be heard by the person who was waiting, and who, he now had no doubt, was Ten-Ichi, for it was plainly apparent that the individual outside had not been expected by the members of the clique.

Instantly there was a resounding whack against the screen on the other side, which was as quickly responded to, inside, by one that was equally loud, and then all was silent again, and the minutes dragged themselves along as slowly as they had done after the sounding of the first alarm.

So, when about an equal lapse of time had intervened, came an answering tap like the one first given in response by the horned chief on the inside, and then the signal was given to raise the shutter.

It was evident that whoever waited for admittance, he was entitled to sit among them, for while the screen was drawn up the members of the order resumed their seats, so that when Ten-Ichi did step past the barrier the appearance of the place was precisely the same as it had been when Nick—and later when the countess—entered.

No, there was one difference, for in the excitement of apprehension that had attended them all alike with the exception of the detective, not one of the members had remembered to throw a hood and cloak over the now trembling form of the countess.

Thus it was that when Ten-Ichi entered the room she was standing in the very center of the place and almost

alone, and with not a suggestion of extra covering to conceal her identity.

Ten-Ichi had not advanced half a dozen steps ere he discovered her, and he came to an abrupt stop and, raising one arm, pointed his finger at her threateningly.

Instantly two of the members leaped forward and threw a cloak and hood upon her, whereat Ten-Ichi bowed his head, stretched out his hands to receive another of the dominoes for his own covering, and, having adjusted it, sank into a chair as if utterly oblivious of his surroundings.

Before he wrapped the cloak around him and covered his head with the hood, all had an opportunity to see him, and there was not one who did not regard him as a very old man, although, strange to say, that effect had not been produced either by wig or beard, for he wore neither.

As Nick looked upon his assistant, even he wondered at the art of the young Jap.

When he entered the room everything about him indicated that he was a small, worn, bent, parchment-skinned, shriveled old man, and the effects had been produced so dexterously that even a close and careful observer would have found it difficult to detect an evidence of fraud.

It seemed, when he took his seat, as if every eye in the room were centered upon him through the slits in the hoods, and after a moment of silence, the person on the dais who wore the horns asked him in English who he was.

For reply, Ten-Ichi rose slowly to his feet, and after a moment of silent waiting, as if to lend added impression and emphasis to what he said, he addressed the presiding officer rapidly, and in a language which was unknown even to Nick Carter, and which, therefore, he correctly assumed to be Thibetan, for that was one of the very few languages of the earth which he did not understand perfectly.

During five minutes after that there were rapid questions and answers between the two, after which Ten-Ichi resumed his seat and the chief said to the others in English:

"I find, my compatriots, that we have an unexpected guest among us, who, having discovered our signals, has come here to make himself known to us to-night. He is far advanced in the secrets of our order and hails from a country that is far away; but here, we know no country or allegiance, save to our satanic master, and I, therefore, command that you receive him as one who is greater than all of us, save myself. We will now proceed with the initiation of the woman. Madam, stand forth."

The Countess of Croydon raised herself slowly to her feet, and instantly the coak and hood were stripped from her.

Then she was seized on either side and marched across the floor of the cellar to a low platform not larger than the top of an ordinary library table and of about one foot in height. There her skirts were drawn tightly around her ankles while a strap was passed across them and buckled firmly into place; another strap was fastened across her waist in the same manner, and still another one pinioned her white throat to the shield-shaped board behind her. Then her arms were stretched out at right angles from her body, and other straps pinioned them to the shield at elbows and wrists, and so she stood before them against the black background of the shield, white and terrified.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CHIEF OF THE DEVIL'S CLIQUE.

"What form of mania is it that can beset a good woman, to induce her to place herself voluntarily in such a position as this one?" was an interesting question that the detective asked of himself, but to which he could find no satisfactory answer.

Notwithstanding the fact that she had vountarily brought the surrounding conditions upon herself, Nick could not help experiencing a sensation of genuine pity for her as she stood there against the black background of the huge shield, pinioned to it by the unyielding straps so that she could not move the fraction of an inch.

She was very beautiful, too, and strikingly so now that all the blood seemed to have forsaken her body and left her as white as alabaster.

But it was plain that she had nerved herself for the ordeal, whatever it might be, and was resolved not to flinch, for although the detective could see that she trembled in spite of her resolutions, she still faced them with a sneer of defiance which she had assumed to conceal her terror.

"What next?" thought Nick; but he was soon to know.

The cloaked and hooded figures rose from their chairs, crossed to the farther end of the cellar and quickly divested themselves of their robes and hoods, and he saw that one and all of them were disguised like the man on the throne, in red, skin-fitting garments, pointed shoes, horned headpieces and red-stained faces and hands.

He alone had retained his place and his domino costume, but he was quickly seized and led across the room with the others. There, he was placed in a chair, the cloak and hood were taken from him, and he found himself seated in the disguise he wore when he entered the place, and which his companions believed to be his natural person, facing the beautiful and now panting woman who was strapped to the shield against the wall.

Next, a long, benchlike table was dragged from another corner and placed across the floor beside him, and then he began to understand, for when the canvas with which it was covered was drawn aside he saw that the table was covered with a litter of daggers of the same design and pattern as those affected by Dazaar.

There seemed to be at least a hundred of them in the heap upon the table, and the light from the dozen lamps in the place gleamed upon them so that they made him think of a mass of reptiles bunched and coiled together.

Having placed the table in position, the men drew back and formed in line behind it a few feet away, and the chief descended slowly from the dais, and, advancing to the table, seized one of the knives and hurled it without any apparent aim straight at the shrinking form of the woman against the shield.

The dagger grazed the top of her head, burying its point into the shield behind her so close to her crown that it was lost in the masses of her hair; and the countess, in spite of her resolutions, uttered a shriek of terror.

To her cry, however, not the slightest attention was paid.

The chief turned away after he had thrown the dagger, and a second man stepped forward. He also seized a dagger and hurled it, with the same seeming carelessness of aim, but it nevertheless flew true to its mark, for it stuck, quivering and vibrant, close against the fingers of the woman's right hand.

Again she shrieked, and again no notice was taken of her.

A third person advanced and hurled another dagger, which entered the shield close to the tips of the fingers of the woman's left hand; a fourth and fifth entered the board beneath her arms on either side; a sixth and seventh, just above them; and then, one after another they followed down either side of her body to her feet until she was standing between a double row of glittering knives which had been thrown around her from a distance of thirty feet; and yet there were many spaces that had not been filled, and there was still a huge heap of the weapons upon the table.

All this time the chief had thrown but the one knife, and Ten-Ichi, the stranger, had thrown none. But now the chief advanced again, and, having selected two of the daggers from the table, he stood with them poised in his hands while he addressed a few words in that unknown tongue to Ten-Ichi.

Having received a satisfactory reply, he advanced to the table, raised the daggers in the air and then with a quick and unerring motion, launched them both forward at the same instant, performing a feat that is almost too difficult to comprehend, for, with the accu-

racy of rifle balls, they flew to the selected mark, and in another instant had buried their points close beside the cheeks and immediately beneath the lobes of the woman's ears.

The scream which the countess uttered had hardly died away when Ten-Ichi took the place of the chief of the devils at the table, and with apparent unconcern also seized upon two of the weapons.

Then, having placed four others within easy reach and with their points toward him, he threw them, two at a time until the six were thrown, and so rapidly that it seemed as if the air was filled with flying knives, and he placed them all close beside the ones thrown by the chief.

"By Jove!" thought Nick. "The little Jap is enough for him at that."

Then he turned his eyes in the direction of the woman against the shield, and he saw that she had fainted. But even though she was unconscious, the straps which bound her to the wall held her firmly in position, and the hilts of the daggers which surrounded her head had prevented it from falling forward, so that she hung there, unconscious, a veritable cross of daggers.

With a bound the detective leaped to his feet and started toward her careless of the promise he had made to remain silent and motionless throughout the ordeal with which the countess had to contend, but he had not taken the second step ere the chief of the devils, bending forward, had seized another of the daggers and hurled it with terrific velocity, full at him.

It was done so quickly that had Ten-Ichi sought to prevent it, he could not have done so, and it was just as well that he did not make the effort, for, as events proved, Nick Carter was equal to the emergency.

He had not fairly left his chair ere he remembered the injunction that had been placed upon him, and instinctively he realized what was coming, so that with that second step he took, he ducked his head.

The dagger, which had been hurled so that it would turn and strike him with the hilt foremost, flew harmlessly over his head, grazing him as it passed, but it caught the man who had risen to bar his way, exactly between the eyes, and he went to the floor like a stricken bullock.

The detective did not know how many more daggers might follow the first one, and he acted as he always did, instantaneously.

With the same motion he made when he dodged the flying dagger, he turned and leaped like a tiger cat, straight back again to the table whereon the daggers were heaped, and beside which the chief of the devils was standing. And before that individual could seize upon another weapon, he was seized in the relentless grasp of Nick Carter, borne to his knees, and the point of one of his own weapons was pressed against his throat.

It all happened within the fraction of a second, and before another person in that cellar room could make a move to prevent it; and when it did happen, they all stood steadfastly in their places, for the clear voice of the detective rang out in no unmistakable emphasis.

"Stand fast, all of you," he shouted. "At the first move in this direction, I will bury this dagger in your master's throat!"

There was no doubt that he meant what he said, and they obeyed him; and Nick noticed with pleasure and pride, that Ten-Ichi remembered the orders that had been given him, and also remained perfectly still.

But that was not all that was revealed to Nick Carter by the quick and dexterous move he had made.

In seizing the chief of that devilish crew, and forcing him to his knees, the detective made another discovery and one which was more of a surprise to him than he would have cared to admit.

The mere touch of his hands upon the person of the chief of the devils was the open sesame to his understanding, and when there was added to the soft thrill that went through him as he seized upon the arms and shoulders of the chief, was added the fact that there was no resisting strength to offer itself against his own, he knew that he had his hands upon a woman, and he was instantly convinced that the chief of the Devil's Clique was none other than Irma Plavatski, a Russian countess whom he had been tracking for some time.

But with the same instant that he made the discovery, he determined that he would not let it be known that he had done so, and releasing his hold, he stepped back again, but still with the dagger poised in his hand, prepared for any emergency that might arise.

"May I apologize to your highness?" he asked, with seeming humility. "I did what I have done because I thought my life in danger, and in the country where I was reared, we are always quick to defend ourselves."

To his surprise it was Ten-Ichi who replied to him, and not the one whom he addressed.

The Jap stepped forward quickly, and, holding out one of his apparently withered hands, demanded sternly:

"Give me that dagger!"

Without a word, Nick obeyed him.

"Now resume your seat," he added, and again the detective obeyed, for he saw through the wisdom of Ten-Ichi's act, which was intended to assure him that there would be no resentment against his act, and also to afford the chief time to return to the dais.

If Irma Plavatski was aware that the novitiate whom she believed to be Thomas Chelsea had penetrated her disguise, she did not make the matter manifest, but, instead, she resumed her thronelike seat with matchless imperturbability, and, having done so, quickly ordered that the countess be taken down from the shield.

In a moment more she was released. Restoratives were applied to her, and presently she opened her eyes, gazed vacantly around her, shuddered and closed them again, and it immediately became plain to Nick that she had suffered a shock to her nerves from which she would not soon recover.

"Now, Thomas Chelsea," said Irma, speaking in the disguised voice she assumed so well, "it is your turn. You saw the woman strapped to the board so that she could not move, but you will stand there without straps to hold you, while my daggers make a cross around your form, and if you so much as move or flinch, or if you faint from terror as the woman did, the next one thrown will pierce your heart."

CHAPTER VII.

THE KING OF KNIFE THROWERS.

For just one instant, while the men were starting forward to remove the daggers from the black shield against the wall, the thought flashed through Nick Carter's mind that his disguise might have been penetrated and that by taking his position against the shield, he might be voluntarily giving up his life, and in that instant he hesitated, wondering if it would not be perhaps better to call the signal to Patsy, whom he well knew must by that time have taken up his position in the other part of the cellar with the men he had ordered to be there.

But to call upon them now, he knew would be to bring about an unnecessary loss of life, for the men who were gathered around him in the back cellar were all armed, he knew, and he had no doubt that they would fight desperately.

For one instant also he permitted his glance to rest upon Ten-Ichi, who was experienced in these devilish ceremonies, but the young wise-acre made no sign, but sat blinking at the lights and the scenes around him as if he were oblivious of sights and sounds alike.

That decided Nick, and he arose, crossed the room, mounted the small platform, and put his back against the shield from which the daggers that had been thrown around the form of the countess had now been removed.

"Fire away," he said, scornfully. "I reckon I can stand it if you can, but I just want to give the whole outfit here one word of warning."

Irma, in her character of Chief of the Clique, smiled. It was plainly to be seen that she admired the daredevil spirit of the breezy Westerner, and it was also evident that she had no suspicion that her disguise had been penetrated, and that this stranger believed her to be other than what she represented—a man, and the chief of the Devil Worshipers.

"A warning?" she said. "It is not for you to warn, but to take warning. Nevertheless, we will hear what you have to say. What is it?"

"This: I'm not made of the sort of stuff that likes

to be made a plaything of. If you stand me up there and shoot knives at me simply for the purpose of trying my nerve, and to see if I'm good for it, well and good. I'll go through it like a man, but I'll tell you right now that I wouldn't give a rap to be a devil among you, unless I can be as big and bad a one as any of you."

"Very good. What more, sir?"

"This: If any of you have got the idea in your heads that you are going to have fun with me, and it is your intention to prick me once in the while with those daggers, let me advise you not to try it on, because it won't work."

"Explain what you mean."

"I mean that I shall watch every one of you while you sling those weapons into the board around me, and that if one of you should draw a drop of my blood in doing it, I'll draw a cupfull of his when the performance is over."

"You speak bravely for one who is about to put his very life in jeopardy."

"Oh, I know that you have no intention of killing me. That wouldn't pay, and you have more reason to keep me alive than you have to murder me. I've given you that warning only because I don't care to be made fun of, so don't try it. Now go ahead, and when you are through, I'll show you that I can do a little knife-throwing myself, if you have got the courage to stand up here in my place."

Just here the bent and withered figure of disguised Ten-Ichi rose from the chair, moved forward across the space that separated him from the dais upon which Irma was seated, and knelt before the throne. Then, with his hands clasped together behind his back and his head bent forward so that his chin rested on his bosom, he spoke rapidly in that unknown dialect of Thibet while Irma listened attentively, and Nick, glancing hastily toward the others, discovered that one and all of them seemed to understand what was being said, for they were bending forward eagerly, as if drinking in each word that was uttered.

Instantly he came to the conclusion that the entire crew, with the exception of himself, Ten-Ichi and the countess of Croydon, was made up of the satellites of Dazaar, and then, also, he decided that Dazaar was not a man, had never been a man, but was no other than Irma, herself, and that the men with whom he had come in contact, and each of whom he had at times thought might be the arch fiend himself, were mere tools and puppets of hers.

"What a fortunate move it was for me to come to this place in person instead of trusting it all to Ten-Ichi," he thought, as he turned his eyes in the direction of the countess, only to discover that she was still lying upon the improvised couch of boards that they had arranged for her, and that she was staring at the assemblage with wide open, but uncomprehensive and glassy eyes. The ordeal through which she had passed had proved altogether too much for her, and her mind had become, for the time being at least, a blank.

When Ten-Ichi completed his declamation, Irma turned again to Nick.

"Our friend, here, wishes to give an exhibition of his ability as a knife-thrower," she said, "and I am disposed to let him do so. What say you?"

"It would appear that I have very little to say in the matter," replied Nick.

"Are you willing?"

Nick shrugged his shoulders.

"If you are willing, so am I," he replied, "only if it happens that he doesn't understand the English language, you might repeat to him what I said pricking me with the knives."

"I have already done that."

"Then let him go ahead. I don't care."

"You are a brave man, sir."

"I wouldn't be here at all if I were not."

"True; quite true."

She waved to Ten-Ichi to take his place at the table where the knives had been heaped up again, and were awaiting him, and he walked to his place with an unsteady tottering in his gait that might have made even Nick Carter think twice if he had not known that inside that bent and withered form, Ten-Ichi lived.

Here was a case where each man depended fully

upon the nerve of the other, and there would have been no better test in either case than the one that was about to be made.

On Ten-Ichi's part, the very miracle that he was about to perform with the flying knives depended, for its success, as much upon the nerve of the detective as upon his own accuracy and cunning with the weapons, for if he should move from the position he assumed in the beginning, his life would pay the forfeit, and Ten-Ichi would be his slayer.

On Nick's part, he had to place his life unreservedly in the skill of his young assistant. He had to have full confidence in the ability of the Jap to perform what he set out to accomplish, and there could have been no greater test of confidence than this.

Ten-Ichi's first care was to arrange the daggers to suit him, and that was done by placing them in a regular line across the table in front of him, piling them in pyramidal heaps so that the points were toward him, and, that done to his satisfaction, he was ready.

Then he bared his arms to the shoulders, and, uttering a shrill, hissing sound, as if of warning, he commenced his performance.

There has been wonderful exhibitions of knife-throwing in various parts of the world, but there was never anything like that one anywhere before or since.

With the rapidity and almost with the precision of the ticking of a watch, Ten-Ichi's hands rose and fell from the board in front of him, and each time they came up, gleaming daggers flew from his finger tips toward Nick, so that they struck against the boards that formed the shield, with a spat, spat, spat, spat, spat, that was continuous, unceasing, and as regular as clockwork, and between the table and the platform, where Nick stood, there seemed to flow one unending stream of fire where the light from the lamps glistened upon the knives as they flew across the intervening space.

As fast as the tongue could count them, they left Ten-Ichi's hands and struck against the shield.

They began at the crown of Nick Carter's head, and they crept downward, past his ears, beside his cheeks, along his throat and shoulders on either side, then out along his outstretched arms, around his finger tips and back again to his arm pits; thence down his sides and hips, along his legs and back again between them to the height of his knees, in one continuous stream of metalic light. And then, as suddenly as they began, they stopped. The supply was exhausted.

So was Ten-Ichi, apparently, for the instant the last knife was thrown, he tottered to a chair, and, sinking upon it, buried his face in his hands.

At the same instant a round of applause sprang simultaneously from every person in the room—that is, from all save Nick himself, for he had stepped away from the shield, and, having turned his back upon all present, was studying the knives critically.

Not a point had touched him, although many had come so close to his flesh in entering the wood, that he had plainly felt their touches. Nevertheless, he had not lost a drop of blood.

But another, and what seemed to him to be an excellent, idea occurred to him while he stood there gazing upon the daggers, for, in a flash it came to him that every weapon in the room, with the possible exception of others that might be concealed upon the persons of those present, was sticking in the board, and he was between them and the men who might make use of them if they happened to be within reach, and he wondered, while he thought of it in that instantaneous flash, if Ten-Ichi could have had such an idea in his head when he volunteered to give an exhibition of his skill.

Instantly the detective's resolution was taken, and when he wheeled and faced those in the room again, a revolver was grasped in either hand, and they swayed to and fro menacingly.

There was nothing, however, that was menacing in the expression of Nick Carter's face. Instead, it was smiling blandly, and when he saw the men in devil's dresses spring to their feet in consternation at his attitude, he smiled the broader.

Ten-Ichi did not move. He did not seem to comprehend what was taking place at all.

It was Irma Plavatski who spoke first, and so disturbed the tableau.

"What is the meaning of this, sir?" she demanded.

"Nothing at all, your majesty," replied Nick, laughing pleasantly, "only that as you have all tried my nerve, it is my turn now to try yours. You have given me an exhibition with knives, and now, if you don't, one and all, do as I say, I will give you one with these little guns that you will not soon forget. First, Mr. Devil, I want that chap who threw these knives to walk up here and help me with my exhibition, and if I don't give you a better entertainment than he did—well, you watch my smoke."

CHAPTER VIII.

DAZAAR IS TRAPPED AT LAST.

Nick's manner and the tone in which he uttered the words that accompanied, entirely disarmed any suspicions that Irma or her followers might for an instant have entertained. It seemed to be made plain to her, and to them also, that this was simply an exhibition of the character of the man whom they had asked to become a member of their clique.

He did not fear them—he had proved that much already—and not one of their unholy proceedings awed him in the least. He was simply—to them—a daredevil character which found amusement instead of terror in their society, and they were not ill-pleased, for such an experience was an innovation.

Nick had, however, made another discovery through this last move, and that was that the men who were seated about the room were probably unarmed; in short, that they depended upon the knives that were sticking in the boards behind him, for their weapons.

He knew, by the evidence of his own eyesight, how dexterous they were, one and all, with the daggers, and what dangerous weapons they became in their hands—more threatening even than pistols, because they were silent, and quite as deadly. But just now those knives were safely beyond the reach of the men, and he did not propose that they should get their hands upon them again that night.

How he had determined to carry out that plan, we shall see.

Irma turned toward Ten-Ichi when Nick made the demand that he come forward.

"You understand English?" she asked.

"I do."

"You heard the request of our compatriot?"

"I did."

"Are you willing to assist him?"

"I am."

"Then go forward and do as he bids you."

"Am I commanded to do so?"

"Not if you are afraid."

"I have no fear."

"Then go."

Ten-Ichi rose in his place and ambled forward toward the platform, and in the meantime Nick stepped from it to the floor and pulled it away from the wall so that there was a space behind it sufficiently large to receive the knives.

To do that, he was obliged to turn his back to the audience for a moment, but he had no fear in doing so, for he saw plainly that their fears were dispelled, and that they had no thought of treachery, or that either Ten-Ichi or himself were other than they appeared to be.

"Stand upon the platform," he demanded of the seeming old man, "and in order that I may not spoil any of the pretty weapons you use so well, draw them from the shield, and drop them, for the present, behind the platform. Will you do it alone, or shall I help you?"

"I will do it alone, since it is your desire. I am stronger than I look, and not so old as I appear."

"Indeed!" laughed Nick. Then turning toward Irma, while Ten-Ichi busied himself with the knives, he added:

"Did you hear that? He is not so weak as he looks nor so old as he appears. Have you faith, good Satan, in his verity as a Devil Worshiper?"

"Surely," she replied, "else he would not have been permitted to remain with us."

"But how do you know that? He seemed to be a stranger when he came, and it appeared that he was not expected."

Nick was only killing time, but he was doing it amazingly well.

"He is a stranger, and he was not expected, but I know him to be one of us," replied Irma.

"Faith, he threw the knives as if he had had experience," laughed Nick.

"Well, he has drawn them all, now," replied Irma, for Ten-Ichi had dropped the last one behind the platform, "and we are ready for the exhibition you have promised us."

"It will surprise you, I warrant," said Nick. "But, first, let me push this platform back into place. So."

Ten-Ichi had stepped from the platform, and Nick quickly pushed it back again against the wall, effectually covering the knives, and so putting them beyond the reach of anybody in the room.

"Now, Sir Chieftain of this most devilish company," he said, addressing Irma who was lying back comfortably in her chair upon the dais, "I will ask you to step this way."

"For what purpose?" she demanded, starting a little.

"In order to explain to you what I am about to do." Then he laughed again, and, with a touch of irony in his voice, he added:

"Is it possible that you are afraid of what I may do?"

"Afraid? I fear nothing on earth or in Hades."

"Nor in heaven?" asked Nick.

"Bah!" she said.

"Then come here.'

She descended from the dais and crossed the floor to the platform.

"Now, Sir Chieftain," drawled Nick, in a tone that was meant to dare her to comply with his wishes, and to make it appear that he believed her afraid to do so, "I will ask you to take your place against the shield, and to suffer the straps to be buckled across you, so that you cannot move, even as you did with that poor woman who has not recovered from the shock of it yet."

"Why? I thought you were to give the exhibition with the aid of our compatriot here."

"So I am; but the act requires two persons besides myself."

"Very well, strap me fast if you will."

"I will ask our friend, here, to do it for me. Sir, if you will be so kind."

Irma placed her back against the shield, and Ten-Ichi, without an instant's loss of time, buckled the straps in their places, attending to it that each one was securely fastened, and sufficiently tight so that she could not by any possibility free herself. Then, turning to the detective, he bowed and announced that it was done.

"Good," said Nick. "If it is done, it is well done."

Then, calmly turning his back upon Irma, who was regarding him with wondering eyes, and addressing the others in the room, who were also looking on in amazement, he asked:

"How many of you here understand English? One may speak for all."

Irma replied for them from behind Nick.

"Not one of them," she said. "They are Thibetans, all of them. Many of them speak a little Russian, some of them speak Chinese, and a few can understand Japanese, but not one of them understands or speaks English."

"Indeed!" said Nick. "That is strange. Are there no Devil Worshipers in this country?"

Irma did not reply, and it became evident to Nick that she was losing her confidence in him, for she raised her voice and spoke rapidly in the Thibetan tongue.

Ten-Ichi, however, understood, of course, and with apparent unconcern, he translated the words to Nick almost as soon as they were uttered.

"The chief says that he does not entirely trust you, and that they are to watch you closely and to rush forward at the first sign of treachery," he said.

Nick laughed, and in the same easy tone replied:

"Inform Mme. Plavatski that she had much better warn them to keep their places, for the first one who advances a step in this direction will drop dead in his tracks with a bullet in his brain. Inform her, also, that the game is up. Tell her also that I am not Thomas Chelsea, but Nick Carter, her most affectionate

friend. Tell her, also, that you are not what you seem, but are here to assist me. Tell her, also, that we have found the great Dazaar at last, and that he—or rather she—is strapped to the wall behind us, where she cannot move. Tell her that in another moment the iron shutter, which separates this part of the cellar from the other, will fall from its place, and that in the aperture will stand a few trusted men who are in my employ, and who are here to assist me in conducting this entire crew to jail, and from there, when the time shall come, to the hangman, or the electric chair. Tell her——"

He got no further, for at that instant Irma uttered an unintelligible cry, which, however, seemed to be perfectly understood by her followers, for they acted upon it instantly.

CHAPTER IX.

A BATTLE IN INFERNAL REGIONS.

Notwithstanding the fact that the detective stood upon the platform facing them and that he held a trusty revolver in either hand with which he was menacing them, the men did not hesitate to act when Irma Plavatski's cry rang through the room.

It was evidently a warning cry concerning which they had been well drilled, and they responded to it with a swiftness that would have done credit to experienced soldiers.

With such promptness did they act, in fact, that in the twinkling of an eye, the lights of the room crashed to the floor and the cellar was shrouded in utter darkness.

And yet, not one of the men seemed to have moved from his place, for, had one of them done so, Nick Carter would have kept his word and fired, for he was resolved that the lives of a few Thibetans, more or less, should not stand in the way of his capture of Dazaar, who, he was now convinced, was one and the same with Irma Plavatski.

It has been said that there were twelve lamps in the cellar room, and it must also be explained that not one of them was within reach of the men where they were grouped together, facing the platform upon which their chief had so inanely permitted herself to be strapped into helplessness.

Nevertheless, every lamp was shattered to the floor and extinguished at the self same instant, demonstrating the fact that whenever, and wherever the Devil Worshipers chose to hold one of their meetings, arrangements were made in anticipation of possible interruption, and Nick realized, the instant the lights went out, that they must have been connected with one another by cords, and that the principle cord, which would extinguish them all, had been extended around the room in such a manner as to be within easy reach from any part of it, at any moment.

It was a moment in which quick thought and quicker action were as necessary as breath itself, for the maintainence of life, for Nick Carter knew that the first dash the men made would be to liberate their chief, or their queen, whichever name they chose to call her, and that whoever should stand in the way of their success would stand but small chance in opposing himself against their united strength and numbers.

Never, perhaps, in his entire career, had his own mighty strength and daring been put to such a test as was comprehended in the task that was set for him at that moment, and never, as he frequently stated to his friends afterward, had he acted with clearer perceptions of the necessities of the moment, than then.

In order to understand perfectly what he accomplished, it must be remembered that he was at that instant standing near the front of the platform, facing the followers of Dazaar, and that Irma Plavatski—or Dazaar, as the detective now believed her to be—was strapped to a huge shield which rested upon the platform and which leaned against the wall of the cellar; also that Ten-Ichi was near at hand.

This, then, in a few words, is what happened:

The instant that Irma gave her warning cry, and even in that brief space of time which intervened before the lamps crashed to the floor, Nick shouted out the call that had been agreed upon between himself and Patsy.

"Now, Patsy, now!" he called.

Then, with the crashing of the lamps and the instantaneous darkness which followed, Nick turned and leaped toward the shield which was not more than four feet from where he was standing.

Stooping a little, for the shield was narrower as it approached the floor, he found that with his arms outstretched, he could just reach across it so that his fingers closed around the opposite edges, and then, with a gigantic effort, he lifted it, together with the added weight of the woman who was strapped to it, bodily from the platform, stepped quickly to the right and down upon the floor, and, turning, so that the back of the shield was toward the room and, therefore, toward the advancing men—so that his own form was pressed against Irma's, and the shield was therefore between them and the Thibetans—he backed into the corner and placed his burden again upon the floor.

It was all accomplished in less than two seconds of time, but his task was not entirely done, even then, for he realized that Irma Plavatski must be silenced.

Indeed, she had already cried out for help twice by the time he had reached the corner, but the tumult in the cellar was so great that her voice had not been heard, and even if it had reached the ears of her followers, they would not have been able to locate the sound.

But he did not intend that she should utter a third call for help—and she did not.

The instant he placed the shield upon the floor, Nick's vial of stronger chloroform was drawn from one of his pockets and the contents were emptied upon the small handkerchief he carried with it.

Pressing it quickly and firmly over her nostrils and mouth, and with the other hand compelling her to breathe, and so inhale the fumes, scarcely a perceptible time elapsed before he knew that she was beyond the power of summoning aid to her again, and he stooped and passed from beneath the shield to confront the men again, for he knew that he had left Ten-Ichi in dire peril.

But brief as had been the time from the moment he seized the shield and Irma and carried them to the corner until he stepped out again from behind its shelter, much had happened.

The room, which an instant before had been in utter darkness, was now ablaze with light, and it was that sort of light which struck awe and terror to the hearts of the Thibetans—a light of deepest emerald green.

Even Nick Carter came to a momentary halt, amazed at what he saw.

The Thibetans, arrested in the very act of rushing forward, by that terrible glare of green, flaming in their eyes, came to a halt and huddled themselves together in the center of the room, terrified by what they saw, for the glare itself was only a part of it.

And over at the doorway, where the iron shutter had been torn from its fastenings and hurled to the floor, five stalwart men, led by fearless Patsy, halted in consternation just inside the threshold, spellbound and for an instant paralyzed by the spectacle they saw.

To explain what had happened and how it happened, we must return for one moment to Ten-Ichi at the instant when the lights went out and Nick Carter seized upon the shield and carried it, with its burden, from the platform.

Ten-Ichi, as we know, was not inexperienced with Devil Worshipers.

There was very little connected with their ceremonies that he did not know, and had not learned fully and completely in his own country and in Thibet, which is the home of Devil Worshipers, and before going to that cellar at all, he had prepared himself for any emergency that might arise, and particularly for the one which had arisen, and which he had actually anticipated.

Remembering his instructions to act independently of the detective and to govern himself precisely as if he were alone and unaided, he did the very thing that he had intended to do, when he believed that nobody would be at hand to help him.

The instant the lamps were smashed and the lights went out he leaped upon the platform, and, drawing a paper package from one of his pockets, emptied its contents at his feet.

To strike a match and drop it upon the powder that

had been contained in the package, was the work of an instant, and then, when a dense volume of emerald green smoke, so brilliant that it dazzled the eyes, shot upward from the center of the platform where he had lighted the powder, he stepped backward again, and took a second package from another pocket.

Even in that instant he noticed that the shield, with its prisoner strapped upon it, had disappeared, but he did not delay in the work he had to do.

A quick motion opened the package into an accordeon-like arrangement which resembled a camera more than anything else, and the flame of another match lighted a magnesium wire that it contained, and this lighted instrument he held high over his head, pointing it at the mass of emerald green smoke.

The effect was astounding, and it was not surprising that Thibetans and white men alike were amazed and for a moment stupefied by the spectacle.

From the spot where Ten-Ichi was standing, nothing more than the smoke of his green fire could be seen, but he perfectly understood the nature of the view obtained from the other side of it.

Inside the instrument, which for want of a better name we will call a camera, was a set of a dozen slides which worked upon a spring which the operator had only to touch to set in motion, and the light from the burning magnesium wire threw a reflection of those pictures, enlarged so that the figures seemed like giants, upon the smoke.

And the pictures were awful to contemplate.

They were scenes of many devils fighting among themselves. They were clawing, tearing, biting, stabbing, writhing and twisting this way and that, and the dozen scenes with which the camera was supplied, changed with the rapidity of the scenes of a biograph, for they were arranged upon a disc where they revolved with the rapidity of thought.

From that part of the room that was in front of the green smoke, it seemed as if the gates of the inferno had been rent assunder, and that all the horrible creatures which infest the place and render the very thought of it a terror to mankind, had engaged in a terrific warfare among themselves.

So perfect was the representation that it seemed as if the shouts and cries, the curses and moans, the shrieks and horrible epithets of the war in the inferno could be heard, and so gigantic were the figures that fought and tore at each other's throats against the rolling and tumbling smoke of the emerald green fire, that the spectators stood before the awful scenes, trembling, and even the detective, although he stood where he could see Ten-Ichi at work behind it all, was astounded.

But he knew that it could last but a moment; that the green fire upon which the terrible pictures were thrown must soon die out, and so lose its effect.

He waited, however, until he knew that the fire was approaching its end, and then he called to Patsy, and his men at the door.

"Ready, now! Lights, all!" he shouted, and at the same instant he pulled his own electric bull's-eye from his pocket, pressed the spring, and threw it glaring and dazzling brilliancy against the Thibetans.

At that instant, too, the light of the green fire disappeared as if by magic, for Ten-Ichi, hearing the voice of Nick, threw a second powder upon the blaze which extinguished it instantly.

But the room was not in darkness as it had been before, for there were eight bright electric lights in the hands of Nick Carter, his two assistants, and the five plain-clothes men, bearing full upon the now thoroughly demoralized Thibetans.

CHAPTER X.

THE PROPHESY OF DAZAAR.

If the men, headed by Patsy, who had waited in the outside cellar for the moment to break their way through the iron shutter to the assistance of Nick Carter, expected a fight, they were doomed to disappointment, for there was not a suggestion of fight left in the hearts of the Thibetan followers of Dazaar.

Ten-Ichi's magic had effectually taken out of them what little they might have had left, but it is safe to say that with the disappearance of their chief, or as we

know her, Irma Plavatski, they were without a leader, and, therefore, helpless.

That she had disappeared they did not seem to doubt, and that she had somehow gone up—or down—in the green smoke, carried away by the terrible beings who had appeared upon it, they no doubt believed.

She was behind the shield that rested against the wall in one corner of the cellar, and she was unconscious; they could neither see nor hear her, and, therefore, they believed that she had been literally carried away before their very eyes.

They, therefore, offered no resistance whatever against the detective and his men, but permitted themselves to be shackled and handcuffed like so many children.

Through all these scenes it appeared as if the Countess of Croydon had remained a passive spectator, seeing everything, understanding nothing, and without even sufficient intelligence left to her to be terrified.

Nick Carter went to her at once as soon as he could do so, and found her with her eyes wide open, lying upon the improvised couch of boards that had been provided for her; and when he addressed her, she gazed up at him with vacant, staring eyes, and an imbecilic smile upon her beautiful face that was at once pathetic and terrible.

Then he turned away and crossed the room to the corner where he had placed the shield.

A moment sufficed to liberate Irma Plavatski from the straps which held her limp form against the boards, and the detective having seated her in a chair and applied restoratives which he carried with him, she presently sighed and opened her eyes to the full realization of her predicament.

At first she did not speak, but let her eyes travel hither and yon about the cellar room taking in and considering every detail they encountered, and Nick, watching her narrowly, realized that, although she was captured, she was by no means tamed.

Presently, having satisfied herself that there was left no chance of escape, and having decided to accept the inevitable without complaint, she turned her eyes again toward Nick.

"So you are Nick Carter?" she said, coolly.

"That, Madam Dazaar, unfortunately for you, is my name."

"And you outwitted me this time, didn't you?"

"So it would seem."

"But why do you call me Madam Dazaar?"

"Chiefly because the name seems to fit you."

"Suppose I should deny that I am Dazaar?"

"It would make no difference in your fate, madam."

"My fate? Bah! What have you, a puny mortal like you, to do with fate?"

"Much, I think, with yours."

"If it pleasures you to think so, Mr. Carter, why, think it, by all means; but, nevertheless, my fate, as well as your own, is not in mortal hands."

"It would seem that your present predicament would contradict that statement, madam."

"My present predicament is only temporary, as you will discover."

Nick shrugged his shoulders.

"You played the part of Thomas Chelsea superbly, my gay detective," she said, laughing.

"If it deceived you it must have been well done," replied Nick.

"What have you done with him?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"But you must have done something with him. Really, sir, I can hardly believe yet that you are not he, the make-up is so perfect."

"He is at my house awaiting my return," said Nick.

"Do you mean to insinuate that he betrayed me?"

"I insinuate nothing, madam."

She laughed again.

"He would not if he could," she said, "and he could not if he would, so there you are."

"And yet, he must have known you, and you him."

"Oh, yes, we know each other."

"But does he know that you are Dazaar?" asked Nick.

"Do you know that I am Dazaar?" she retorted.

"I think I do."

"Well, ask him if he does."

"Are you not Dazaar? That is, the only representative of that name?"

"Ask me something easier, my festive friend."

"These men, here, shall be made to confess."

"Indeed! You interest me. How, pray?"

"I will find a way."

"Will you? How interesting. Truly, your opinion of your own prowess is amazing."

"It is based upon experience, madam."

"Doubtless."

"I will find a way to persuade them to a confession."

She laughed scornfully.

"Not all the tortures of the inferno itself could draw a word from any one of them," she said; "not even the embraces of the maiden of steel."

"That reminds me," said Nick, "that when I last heard from you, you wrote me a very unnecessary untruth. I believe you told me that you had Patsy again in your power, especially preserved for the uses of that same metalic maiden."

"Oh, well, I could have had him, and when I wrote the note, I meant to take him, for he was at that moment in my power, but I had other plans, and so I decided not to interfere with his liberty just then. May I venture to ask you, Mr. Carter, what you are going to do with me, now that you have got me—or think you have?"

"I mean, for one thing, to put you where you cannot escape."

"Ah! And for another thing—what? There must be other things since you take so much pains to mention only one."

"I can count five murders against you, that I know about. I have no doubt there are many others."

"Haven't you, indeed? How pleasant. Well, there are many others. Really, I should dislike very much to be compelled to count them."

"You admit them, then?"

"Certainly. Why not? Murder, as you call it—but permit me to suggest that it is a very inelegant word—is my avocation; shall I say, my delight? And, above all things, I should enjoy an opportunity to count you among my victims; that is, if I could have time and opportunity to select for you the death that would please me most to look upon."

"What an infinitely pleasant individual you are," said Nick, with deep disgust.

"Thank you," she replied. "I suppose I ought to blush."

"And yet," continued Nick, "you are very beautiful. How can a woman like you descend to such depths of infamy?"

"Oh, easily. You just sit on the edge of things and slide down. I remember that I once told you that I was a sorceress, Mr. Carter."

"I believe you did."

"Very well, I am also something of a prophet."

"That, among other things, I suppose."

"Exactly; that, among other things—many other things. Just now, I prefer to pose as a prophetess. I am in the mood to give you the benefit of my prophetic vision."

"Well, you have got about ten minutes more, while we wait for the arrival of the two patrol wagons I have sent for."

"Then, if you will promise not to interrupt me, I will prophesy for you."

"Go ahead. Perhaps it will serve to kill time while we wait."

"Then listen: I see myself taken to prison and placed under a guard from which there is supposed to be no hope of escape. I see the guard who watches over me, watched in its turn by another guard, and so on until there are three or four guards who watch each other, to prevent my exercising any of my strange powers. I see an interval of time elapsing during which you as well as those watchers come to the conclusion that I will never be able to escape and that I will die in the electric chair. I see the time for my trial approaching so that it draws quite near. Do you follow me, Mr. Carter?"

"Perfectly."

"After that there is a blank. A period of nothing, as it were, and then I see myself again outside the prison walls, free, unpursued, enjoying perfect liberty. Do you still follow me?"

"I do."

"Next I see you. You are seated in your chair in your own home. Then the scene changes, and you are out upon the street, called away from your fireside by a sudden and an unexpected summons. You are absent an hour, and when you return, it is to find your house in chaos. Furniture is overturned, there are two dead bodies on the floor in different rooms, your assistants and servants are nowhere to be found, and, above all, your wife—your wife, Mr. Carter—is missing. I see you shudder, Mr. Carter. That scene touches you, does it not?"

Nick was silent.

"There is one more scene in my vision, sir," she continued, "and it is this: I see you turn away in despair, made frantic by your loss, and, as you turn, you are confronted by a form that stands in the doorway. That form is my own, Mr. Carter, and you leap forward to seize upon me, but even as you do so, it fades away in your grasp. There. That is all."

"I have been threatened with ghosts before now," said Nick.

"Oh, that is no ghost story, as you will discover. Consider well the prophecy I have told you, and when the time comes to remind you of it, remember that I warned you. I think I hear your patrol wagons at the door."

"Yes. They are here."

"One more word before we go."

She motioned to Ten-Ichi to approach, and when he stood beside her, still enveloped in the disguise he had worn throughout the scenes just described, she said, coldly:

"I think I know you, sir, better than you think I do, and were I to die a thousand deaths this minute, and my flesh be torn from my bones, and my bones burned in fire, it would not save you, for there are others after you who will not fail."

Then, calmly, she turned her face again to the detective and added:

"I am ready now. Let us go."

An hour later Irma Plavatski and her followers, captured in the cellar meeting room of the Devil Worshipers, were confined in separate cells in prison, and Nick Carter returned to his home feeling assured that Dazaar was at last behind prison bars from which there was no possibility of escape.

When, later, he liberated Thomas Chelsea from the chair that confined him, he said:

"Mr. Chelsea, you are a young man who interests me. You are reckless, and you keep bad company, but I foresee that nothing I can say will have any effect upon you. Remember this, however; if you meet with trouble, come back here to Nick Carter, and he will befriend you, for you have succeeded in conferring a lasting favor upon him."

THE END.

The next issue of the Nick Carter weekly, No. 377, will be entitled "The Last of the Seven; or, The Confessions of Dazaar," and will deal with the remarkable record of that strange and terrible woman whom we have known as Irma Plavatski. In its pages will be revealed many of the incomprehensible mysteries which made her career possible, and the secrets of the Seven Devils of Dazaar will be unfolded.

NICK CARTER WEEKLY

THE BEST DETECTIVE STORIES IN THE WORLD

339—Nick Carter and the Living Mask; or, Murdered Without a Mark.
340—Nick Carter's Night Watch; or, Working in the Dark.
341—Nick Carter's Chemical Test; or, Animal Blood or Human?
342—Nick Carter Within an Inch of His Life; or, The Mystery of the Pretty Typewriter.
343—Nick Carter and the Phantom of Poverty Lane; or, A Bundle of Tangled Clews.
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